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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KAWC](#) [SIPDIS](#) [HR](#)
SUBJECT: VPOTUS SCENESETTER: PUSHING CROATIA'S INTEGRATION
AGENDA

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Classified By: Ambassador Ralph Frank for reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: Vice President Cheney will visit Croatia at a time of political optimism following the opening of accession negotiations with the European Union in October 2005, the arrest of war crimes suspect Ante Gotovina in December 2005, and the prospect of NATO membership growing ever larger on the horizon. The right-of-center government of Prime Minister Ivo Sanader is aggressively promoting its international credibility, serving as a leader in fostering regional stability and actively lobbying within the European People's Party to generate political support for Croatia's Euro-Atlantic integration. VP Cheney's meetings with PM Sanader and President Stjepan Mesic will provide a unique opportunity to acknowledge the government's political courage in contributing to the arrest of Gotovina, encourage Croatia's continued reforms in preparing for NATO membership, and push for further action on an Article 98 agreement. A separate meeting with Adriatic Three (A-3) prime ministers will serve as a useful forum to support continued regional cooperation on the road to NATO membership. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

COMMITMENT TO INTEGRATION AND REGIONAL STABILITY

12. (U) PM Sanader and his Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) were elected in 2003 on a platform promising to bring Croatia into the EU and NATO. The HDZ has proven it is no longer cut from the same cloth as the nationalist HDZ of late president Franjo Tudjman. Not only did PM Sanader enter into coalition with the leading ethnic Serb and Muslim parties and begin serious implementation of programs to promote refugee returns, he has also made great strides in normalizing relations with Serbia and Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, including high-level visits, visa-free travel, and free trade agreements.

13. (C) The opening of EU accession negotiations last fall was a major victory both internationally and domestically for the Sanader government. Croatia cleared a further political hurdle with the arrest of Ante Gotovina, a former Croatian general under indictment by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) on charges of war crimes committed in the aftermath of the 1995 liberation of territory occupied by rebel Serbs. The Gotovina arrest, applauded by the U.S. and the international community, was not popular domestically, as many Croats consider Gotovina a hero of their fight for independence. At significant political cost, the Sanader government provided critical

intelligence that led to Gotovina's arrest in Spain, then worked to keep the few post-arrest protests focused on "support for Gotovina" rather than opposition to the international community or the ICTY.

¶4. (U) Demonstrating its credibility as an international partner, Croatia has gone from a recipient of UN peacekeeping assistance less than ten years ago to a contributor of 31 troops to ten UN peace support operations (including command of UN forces in Kashmir) and more than 50 troops to NATO's International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan.

¶5. (U) OBJECTIVE: Thank Croatian leaders for their regional leadership, relatively significant contribution to international peace missions, and political courage in bringing Gotovina to justice.

NATO: JUMPING TO JOIN, BUT ARE THEY READY?

¶6. (U) PM Sanader is pushing for a NATO membership invitation at the earliest opportunity, but while there is consensus among the political elite that Croatia belongs in the alliance, the government admits it must do more to educate a general public that is split roughly down the middle over the issue. While the PM's people have a public relations program in the works, we have reminded them that Croatia needs to generate support not just for joining NATO but also for continuing to meet its alliance obligations throughout its membership.

¶7. (U) Croatia's ambitious military reform program is designed to make the armed forces "NATO-ready" by 2007, a difficult task under the best circumstances thanks to a defense budget burdened by excess personnel and obligatory pension payments to war veterans. The government has minimal resources for much-needed equipment procurement. We support

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Croatia's NATO ambitions, but have been very clear in our message that defense reform is an essential pre-condition for Croatia to demonstrate that it will become a net contributor to security through NATO operations.

¶8. (U) Croatia has tried to play a leadership role in the A-3, hosting numerous summits and multilateral exercises. In late April, MFA Kolinda Grabar Kitarovic will host a meeting of foreign ministers from the A-3 and the Baltic states (B-3) to share NATO accession advice and experience.

¶9. (U) OBJECTIVE: Encourage Croatia to build public support for NATO membership and continue necessary defense reforms while working closely with its A-3 partners.

ARTICLE 98: ROOM TO MANEUVER DESPITE PRESIDENT, EU?

¶10. (C) Despite promises when he first took office, PM Sanader has been unable to deliver an Article 98 agreement, due primarily to EU pressure and domestic political opposition based on inaccurate comparisons between the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the ICTY. As explained by President Mesic, the most outspoken opponent of an Article 98 agreement, it is difficult to justify to the public a pact not to turn U.S. citizens over to the ICC when the U.S. expects Croatians to turn their wartime leaders over to the ICTY.

¶11. (C) Much to our frustration, Article 98 provides a clear picture of the political differences between PM Sanader on the right and President Mesic on the left. In contrast to Sanader's unwavering focus on bringing Croatia into the EU and NATO, Mesic's unique brand of populism harkens back to the non-aligned movement of Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito, focusing his foreign policy efforts on places like Libya, Syria, and Iran. Despite limited constitutional powers,

President Mesic serves as the moral tiller of the nation, often setting the political agenda for the general public. With PM Sanader's enthusiasm somewhat dampened by EU overtures against action under Article 98, President Mesic's support has become critical to a future agreement.

¶12. (C) With Gotovina's arrest, however, we have reason to believe movement is possible on this issue. Recently, a number of prominent Croatian politicians, including some members of PM Sanader's HDZ, have begun promoting the signing of an Article 98 agreement as a way to improve relations with the U.S. Public reaction to these comments has remained muted. President Mesic sent somewhat mixed messages in separate March meetings with U.S. Ambassador to NATO Victoria Nuland and Senator George Voinovich. After telling Ambassador Nuland that Gotovina's arrest opened up room for "preparatory work" on the issue, he flatly told Senator Voinovich that Croatia could not consider an Article 98 agreement until the ICTY completes its work in 2010.

¶13. (U) OBJECTIVE: Reinforce the importance the USG attaches to an Article 98 agreement and push leaders to reopen the issue in light of the Gotovina arrest.
FRANK